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Vector Claims to Have Process that Cuts Cancer-Causing Agent in Cigarettes

Vector Group Ltd. said its has developed a new technology that lowers carcinogens in cigarette smoke. The company said it plans to sell the new cigarette in 2001, subject to independent testing.

Vector, whose announcement followed a Tuesday report in The Wall Street Journal, said the technology from its Vector Tobacco unit reduces carcinogenic polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbon, or PAH, compounds, including benzo(a)pyrene. The company said its process reduces compounds to a level below that known to initiate carcinomas.

Vector is among a number of tobacco companies racing to develop and market a "safer" cigarette. Industry leaders Philip Morris Cos. (MO), R.J. Reynolds Tobacco Holdings Inc. (RJR) and British American Tobacco PLC (BTI) have all stepped up their searches for a less-harmful smoke, contrary to past practice when the companies feared introducing such a product would amount to an admission that smoking was dangerous.

According to the Journal, Vector's technology includes treating tobacco with a combination of chemicals, including palladium, a metal most commonly used in catalytic converters in cars.

Vector also recently announced that it has the rights to a genetically modified tobacco that it says is virtually free of nicotine and tobacco-specific nitrosamines, another potent carcinogen found in tobacco.

"We are extremely excited about these breakthroughs," Bennett S. LeBow, Vector's chairman and chief executive, said in a written statement. "While there is no such thing as a safe cigarette, we believe we've eliminated what the health community considers to be the most serious cancer causing agents with these developments. Vector Tobacco is committed to making our innovative products available to smokers as soon as possible."

Vector, which has \$525 million in annual cigarette sales and controls only 1.5% of the U.S. market, is a holding company that indirectly owns Liggett Group Inc. Its brands include Pyramid and Tourney.

According to the Journal article, Liggett scientists in the late 1970s believed they had found a way to cut levels of some cancer-causing chemicals in